

EP-3: Whidbey crew comes home to hero's welcome

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Osborn led his crew off the aircraft to the strains of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A.," and the songs of the Marine Corps, Air Force and the Navy, the three services represented by the crew. The 24 crew members were met by members of their families, each carrying long-stemmed yellow roses.

Thunderous applause from the assembled crowd inside Hangar Six greeted the crew as they entered the hangar for the formal welcoming ceremony.

Rear Adm. Michael L. Holmes, commander, Patrol and Reconnaissance Force Pacific, praised the airmanship, teamwork and conduct of the air crew and said they "made us all proud to be Americans."

At the mention of Osborn's name by Holmes, the crowd stood and applauded. Holmes said he was sure that the only course that would keep all his crew alive was the course that Osborn took.

Earlier that day, at a news conference at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu prior to the crew's departure for Whidbey Island, Osborn described the events following the midair collision in international waters over the South China Sea on March 31, when a Chinese F-8 fighter hit the Navy EP-3E.

"Contrary to some releases," Osborn said, his aircraft was flying straight and level, on autopilot and heading away from Hainan Island in international airspace when it was subjected to harassment from the Chinese fighter. He said the Chinese jet came within three to five feet of his own aircraft twice, and on the third time, the Chinese pilot apparently misjudged and the F-8's vertical stabilizer, where it meets the fuselage, contacted the EP-3E's number one propeller.

The initial result of the collision was the Chinese fighter began breaking apart and the propeller of the EP-3E started throwing off pieces. The EP-3E is a four-engine, turboprop aircraft.

Osborn continued, stating that the F-8's nose struck the nose of the EP-3E as the jet fell apparently out of control to



U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Paul Holcomb.

Led by pilot Lt. Shane Osborn, crewmembers from the U.S. Navy EP-3 ARIES II aircraft involved in the Mar. 31 accident with a Chinese F-8 aircraft are welcomed by senior military officials and civilian leaders at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii.

the sea. Responding to a question, he said his initial thought was, "This guy just killed us." He said the EP-3E rolled over uncontrollably as it started a nose-dive, losing 7,500 to 8,000 feet in altitude before he wrestled it under control.

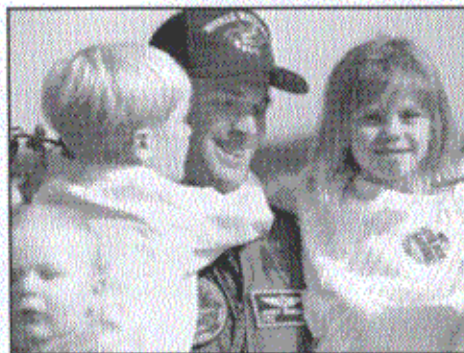
Osborn said the EP-3E was almost upside down and he could look up through the windshield and see the ocean. He stated the EP-3E's left turn, as described by the government of the People's Republic of China as causing the accident, actually was caused by the Chinese F-8 running into the Navy plane, putting the

EP-3E in the out-of-control dive.

Aviation Machinist's Mate Senior Chief Nicholas Mellos, a flight engineer aboard the EP-3E, described the moments following the collision as "mayhem."

He described the crew yelling over the noise of the wind and vibration caused by the loss of pieces of the propellers and the nose cone. He said it was the training that allowed them to gain control over the situation.

"Thank God for the training that we practice every day," Mellos said.



U.S. Navy photo by PH2 Michael Watkins

(Left) CT2 Josef Edmonds of Davis, Calif., is welcomed home by his children upon his arrival at Whidbey Island. (Right) Lt. Shane Osborn from Norfolk, Neb., is greeted by a happy father and mother on the tarmac of Naval Air Station Whidbey Island.



U.S. Navy photo by PH2 Michael Watkins